

All the World and the Tarot

I don't believe that a pack of cards like the tarot can predict your future. I don't believe that any physical set of objects, whether it be cards, tea leaves, crystal ball, gazing at entrails, whatever, can tell you your fortune. On the other hand, though, a human being who knows the tarot symbols can give you good advice or bad advice based on their imaginative interpretation of those symbols randomly shuffled. Following the card reader's advice, good or bad, is still your own choice and should be marked with a great big caveat emptor. That said, let's get to know the symbolic language of the tarot cards so that we can understand what we're on about.

These symbols are some of the archetypes referred to in Jungian psychology. They are not a complete set of all possible archetypes. Carl Jung said that the archetypes are our human instincts, processed through the imagination to make narratives about the various situations in which our instincts will respond with actions. The tarot cards are only some of these narratives but they are specifically ones which relate to the powers which exist in the world. Powers like church and state, patriarchy and matriarchy, love and strength and justice etc. These cards are keys to understanding the stories of how things are done and how things happen or are changed in the world.

Some of the tarot cards are almost the same as ordinary playing cards and there's no particular mystery about that. They were the same until people invented games which use only some of the cards and decided to leave the other ones out.

The pack contains 78 cards. These are arranged as 21 cards referred to as the major ones, 56 cards referred to as the minor ones and one card on its own called The Fool card.

The Fool card symbolises challenging the unknown or stepping into the unknown whether wittingly or unwittingly. All of the rest of the tarot is arranged as musical octaves or groupings of seven. The Fool card is the exception because it means entering a new octave where anything can happen. An adventure into the unexplored regions of life and the world. The word "Tarot" is derived from writing the word "Rota" around in a circle and then beginning from the "T" instead of the "R". Therefore the suggestion is that we are talking about the circular nature of things, the world and time, the seasons, the year, the phases of the moon, the diurnal and nocturnal instincts, the tendency of fashions and ideas to come around again and again. The suggestion is also that we can start from a different part of the cycle to look at the world from a different angle.

All of the cards in the minor pack are human enterprises, plans, adventures, projects, experiences within the world. These are arranged as four sets of two octaves each or, in other words, four suits of cards containing fourteen (two sets of seven) in each suit.

The underpinning theory is that the resonances of octaves or stages and systems of levels are a key part of understanding how the world works, both in nature and in human activity. This does not mean that Western or European forms of music are the whole understanding

of everything. The world is far more complicated than that and, besides, Pythagorean forms are rediscoveries of musical forms which had already been discovered centuries before Pythagoras in Ancient China. But it means that these Western classical music forms are one of the possible ways into understanding the power structures of the world, especially to understanding the power structures which originate from the European historical struggles and philosophies.

When you consider the way that Europe and its colonies and ex-colonies have wielded power in the world, from Greece to Rome, from Rome to Britain and France and Spain, Portugal, Italy and the Pope. Well, you see what I mean. There is something there which needs to be understood.

I would suggest that we shouldn't take P. D. Ouspensky's book on the tarot too seriously. For one thing he gets too caught up in ideas which don't quite make logical sense and for another thing he is prejudiced against "gypsies" whom he describes as "ignorant". The tarot cards arrived in European culture several hundred years ago and are generally believed to have originated in China. Some of the history of the tarot is unknown but we probably have Genghis Khan and his nomadic warriors to thank for the geographical spread of card games and the symbols on the cards.

All of the cards in the major pack represent powers in the world. It is basically a list of human experiences or archetypes which were thought of by the tarot's creators as the great powers or great keys to understanding the world. Think in terms of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and you're in the right philosophical area.

The major cards are:

1. The manipulator or clever controller and skilled expert in impressing others and changing things. Conventionally represented as a male figure. A handy man. Usually called either The Juggler Card or The Magician.
2. The power of women. Usually called The Priestess Card.
3. The power of Matriarchy and the symbol of motherhood and "Mother Nature". Usually called The Empress.
4. The power of Patriarchy. Usually called The Emperor.
5. The power of the religious leader or philosophical teacher, a person of ideas and codes by which to live your life. Could be Socrates, Plato, Buddha, The Pope, Karl Marx etc. Usually called, in European tradition, either The Hierophant or The Pope.
6. The power of love. Represented as two lovers. Usually called The Lovers.
7. Primarily the power of the body and the power to go places and do things in the world but also in the sense of a paradigm giving agency. Usually illustrated as a chariot or some form of vehicle. Can be thought of as a physical vehicle or in the Buddhist sense of vehicles which are "ways of doing it" designed for different types of life in the world. Usually called The Chariot.
8. The powers of Strength and Justice. This card is sometimes swapped over with card eleven. They can either be card eight: Force and card eleven: Justice or card eight: Justice and card eleven: Force. The swapping over of these two cards indicates that, even though Force is a power in the world and Justice is a power in the world also they are inextricably entangled. The administration of honest justice is only possible with some sort of enforcement on its side but force without justice would be a reign of

terror against which the people would ultimately rebel in order to re-impose justice in society. In addition this also shows us that all of these powers in the world can be interdependent. Card eight is usually called Force or Strength or La Forza except when it has been swapped over with card eleven. Then it is usually called Justice. The picture on the Force or Strength card is of a woman holding a lion by its jaws. The picture on the Justice card is the well known Lady of Justice, with sword and scales, as seen on the roof of the Old Bailey.

9. The power of the individual to retreat from the world. Yes, retreat can be a power. The picture shows a person with a lamp, finding their own way. Usually called The Hermit.
10. The power of change, the world turns around, things reverse. The picture is of a great wheel, the Rota from which tarot gets its name. Usually called The Wheel of Change or The Wheel of Fortune.
11. The powers of Justice and Strength. This card is sometimes swapped over with card eight. Card number eleven is halfway through the 21 cards of the major set. Card eleven is usually called Justice except when it has been swapped over with card eight. Then it is usually called Force or Strength or La Forza. The picture on the Force or Strength card is of a woman holding a lion by its jaws. The picture on the Justice card is the well known Lady of Justice, with sword and scales, as seen on the roof of the Old Bailey.
12. The power of reversal. Pictured as a man hanging upside down, tethered by one ankle. His head glows with a radiance like a religious halo. He learns some of the secrets of the world by turning ideas upside down. Like drawing classes where we are instructed to draw the negative space between objects instead of drawing the object itself. Its a good procedure because drawing the object allows your mind to impose a clichéd or preconceived idea onto everything. Drawing the negative space reveals the true shape of things. The same sort of principle can be applied to learning in general. Turn things around in "Rota". Usually called The Hanged Man.
13. The power of Death. Yes, it's true that it doesn't have to necessarily mean that you're immediately going to die. However, mortality is the most basic fact of life and, if we want to understand the world, we have to understand that nothing lasts forever. We learn to adjust our thinking accordingly. Usually simply called Death.
14. The power of Moderation. The Middle way. Justice tempered with Mercy. Not using all of your strength but measuring the amount of force necessary in a situation. All things in moderation. Balance. Restraint. If a strong man uses all of his strength when opening a jam jar he might break it, spill the jam and cut his hand. Be careful. Take it easy. Relax. Take your time. Don't be a glutton or an ass. Gentleness. Usually called Temperance.
15. The power of corruption. Tyranny. Lack of moderation. Enslavement. Overuse of power. Power for power's sake. Cruelty. Insensitivity. Thugishness. Usually called The Devil.
16. The power of confusion and confoundment. The picture is of the tower of Babel from the Bible story. A tower struck by lightning. Over-reaching. Trying too hard to control everything. The inevitable over extension which results in a crash. Boom and bust. The fall of the Roman Empire or any other empire when it reaches too far. Complexity strikes back. Usually called The Tower.
17. The power of the cosmic, the wondrous, the marvelous. Something magical in the nature of reality. The picture is of a human by a water pool. With a jug in one hand

they pore water onto the earth while, with a jug in the other hand, they replenish the pool. There are large symbolic stars in the air above the human's head. A sense of the Numinous and the connection to the source of all. The way to a world beyond. Usually called The Star.

18. The power of the moon. The cycles of the material world in which we live. The magnetic pull of travel and exploration of the mysterious. In the picture a road leads onward, over the hills and far away. Dogs, foxes howl at the moon, sea creatures are moved by the tides. On either side of the road are watch towers. All the world is driven by forces of electromagnetism and gravitation. The Earth, The Moon, The Sun, The Stars move onwards through space and we are drawn to climb the mountains and sail the seas. The pull of the Road. The dream of destiny. The unconscious. The lesser light which reflects the greater light. The reflection in the pool. The reverse of things. Usually called The Moon.
19. The power of light. The need for light to power the plant life from which all life on Earth originates. The chlorophyll. The green. The greater light which the moon reflects. Usually called The Sun.
20. The power of return and final analysis. The picture shows the Christian belief in a last day of judgement when all the people who have died are raised up again and judged for their deeds. Based on the Ancient Egyptian belief in the weighing of the heart against a feather. This card is about what things are worth in the end and what it all really adds up to. At the end of life or the end of a project or an endeavour of some kind what did it amount to? Was anyone helped? Was anyone saved? Was more good done or more harm? Were people happy or in pain? What was changed? What was seeded for the future? What was caused or instigated? When we are called into account either by our gods or our justice systems or our friends or perhaps in our own personal conscience what did we do? Usually called Judgement.
21. The power of the whole world taken together as one. All of it. The whole ball of wax. The entire complex environment of connections and interdependencies. The four systems of minor tarot cards brought together like four pillars of a building. The whole Rota turning spinning around through night and day and summer and winter.
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The Minor suits of cards. Called the "Minor Arcana" while the 21 cards listed above are called the "Major Arcana". The word "Arcana" meaning something which contains secrets. An Ark.

The four suits are:

Cups, also known as Hearts.

Staves, also known as Clubs.

Swords, also known as Spades.

Pentacles, also known as Coins or as Diamonds.

Each suit comprises two octaves of events within the life of a person living in the world.

In each case the octave begins with an ACE and then proceeds through the numbers 2,3,4,5,6,7, when the suit enters its second octave: 8,9,10, Page, Knight, Queen, King.

The actual events occurring in each of the little scenes depicted in each card leave a lot of leeway for imaginative interpretation but the important elements are these:

1. The four areas of human life being examined are: Pleasure, Struggle, Pain and Wealth.
2. The cups represent pleasure, the swords pain, the staves struggle, the coins wealth.
3. Each suit has two octaves. The first octave begins the story, the second octave ends with the project established like a kingdom. The stages in between are semi-arbitrary. The progression from ace to king is visualisable as a syntagmatic axis of a graph. The individual cards along the way are visualisable as the paradigmatic axis of the graph. In other words the sequence is the same but different examples of the paradigm can be swapped in.
4. The interrelations between pleasure, struggle, pain and wealth are complex and each of them contain a bit of the other three. This is the case with all of the tarot cards and is the reason why they have to be presented as a pack of shuffled cards instead of a book with the pages in a fixed order.
5. The whole purpose of the tarot is to carry some philosophical ideas in a form which will be preserved and widely distributed. This method is copied from nature. A tree puts its seeds into sweet and nourishing fruit which will be eaten by birds and other animals who will then excrete the waste product onto the land, causing the seeds to be distributed far and wide along with the manure to nourish their growth. Similarly the tarot is presented as a pack of cards which can be used to play an infinite variety of games and thus be carried by soldiers and travellers of all varieties, spreading the symbols around the world and distributing access to the ideas contained in those symbols. It's genius.

When looking at individual tarot cards placed next to each other, remember that these systems are built upon the relationship of waveforms within an octave so it's like placing a musical note next to another note, using visual and conceptual symbols like notes on a piano keyboard. We can make chords and discords. We can make meaningful sequences or strange contradictions. It's all narrative and it's all music and it's all about how the world works.